

## The World 851

Chapter 851: Secrets And Truths (1)

She looked... different.

Not just older or changed—no, Marie looked a little frailer compared to back then. She had always been small in stature, but now... now she seemed even smaller, almost as if the weight of something invisible was pressing down on her shoulders. Her frame seemed more delicate, her presence less imposing than I remembered.

"Marie," I said slowly, studying her expression. "You don't really intend to tell me about Moriarty, do you?"

Her eyes shifted toward me, calm but unreadable.

"Why do you want to know something like that?" she asked, her tone carrying a quiet challenge. "I don't even know if I'd be able to tell you anything that would actually be useful."

"Anything at all," I pressed. "Even just how he's living, what he's been up to—anything. That's still a hell of a lot more helpful than nothing."

She let out a soft, almost mocking giggle. "Fufu... do you really think I'd tell you, even if you asked me like this?" Her lips curled into a faint smile, and there was something sharp hiding behind it.

"Well, it doesn't hurt to try," I said, my voice dropping lower. "But I'll tell you this—I'm running out of patience. That man is causing more trouble than I can count, and he's incredibly hard to track. I can't even figure out exactly who he is or where he's hiding. And with you being the only real connection I've got, it's only natural I'd come to you with my questions. Don't you think?"

"You're barking up the wrong tree, Leon," she replied without hesitation. "He's very important to me. So naturally, I won't sell him out. And I'm sure... if the situation was reversed, and push came to shove, you'd do something very similar, wouldn't you?"

I stared at her, holding her gaze. There was no flinch in her eyes—only certainty.

"I'm sorry for what I did back then," she continued, her tone softening just slightly. "Almost killing some of your people... Well, I guess something like that can't be easily forgiven, huh?"

The words stirred something sharp in me. Marie had been the one to tell Moriarty about my relationships with women—not all of them, but she made damn sure to single out Gabrielle. Someone who meant everything to me. And because of that, Gabrielle had come dangerously close to getting herself killed.

It was only because Scarlet had managed to save her that day that Gabrielle was still alive. Honestly? If she hadn't been... I didn't know what I would've done to Marie right now. And that wasn't an exaggeration.

"That wasn't my intention at all," she said, as if reading my thoughts. "But I'm not going to say it was just some unfortunate accident either. I don't want to slap a label on something like that—especially not one as heavy as calling it a crime. Not something that severe."

I exhaled slowly, my patience thinning.

"You're not going to tell me about him, are you? Or what his real goal is? No matter how much I push?" I asked.

"Even if you tortured me or killed me, my tongue and lips would stay sealed. You wouldn't get past them. That's how serious I am about this," she said firmly, her eyes locking onto mine without a hint of fear.

I studied her for a moment, then shifted the conversation. "Well then, tell me this—what world did the two of you live in before coming here?"

Her expression twitched, a brief flicker of surprise in her eyes. "...What?"

"You told me you were trying to open a rift to another world, right? Or something along those lines?" I said, keeping my voice even. "Well, there are rifts and portals across this world that lead to other places,

but so far, they've only led to futuristic, AI-filled worlds. At first, I thought maybe that was your world... but now? I'm starting to believe it's somewhere else entirely."

A slow smirk formed on her lips as she listened.

"Listen, Leon," she said, leaning forward slightly, her gaze sharp. "What do you think this world really is?"

"I have no idea," I admitted.

"Have you ever read some of this world's history? It's actually... quite the read. Interesting, entertaining even. It's full of stories—some inspiring, some unbearably tragic. So tragic that you can't help but think they're too much for just ordinary lives. I mean... what if it's all fiction?"

Her words hung in the air, heavy but strange. I wasn't entirely sure where she was going with it, but I could start to sense the direction of her thoughts.

There were countless lives recorded in history that felt far too tragic to be real, too brutal to be just chance. And there were events that defied belief—things no ordinary person could realistically pull off. It was the kind of thing that made you question how much of it was truth... which was why historians even existed in the first place.

"Everything happens for a reason, Leon," she continued, her voice steady but layered with meaning. "Don't you think there could be countless reasons why events like those happen? Have you heard of the great Jeanne, the one who ended the Hundred Year War?"

Of course I had. Everyone in this world knew her name. Jeanne—the goddess who had brought an end to a war that had ravaged the land so deeply it had become unrecognizable.

But why was she bringing her up now? And where exactly was this conversation headed?

"I really have no idea what my purpose here is," Marie said quietly. "It's just that... I promised him. A man from the future, whose world was so bleak that he had to come back to the distant past to change the outcome."

I raised an eyebrow, my voice tightening. "A man from the future?"

"James Moriarty loves that man," she said without hesitation. "Perhaps loves him to the point that he'd do anything—anything—for him to get what he wants. To make sure that man achieves his goal."

So... all of this. Everything Moriarty was doing—it was for the sake of some man from the future?

"And you're following this too, Marie?" I asked, my tone sharper now.

She met my gaze with a faint smile. "That man is the one who saved me. Naturally... I'll help him."

Chapter 852: Secrets And Truths (2)

Moriarty...

That bastard was the kind of enemy I never imagined would end up being such a relentless pain in my ass. The type that just wedges himself into every damn thing, no matter how much you wish he'd disappear.

I honestly didn't expect him to turn out to be a part of this whole twisted puzzle. The more I thought about it, the more it seemed like his role wasn't just some small side piece either—he was tangled deep into it. Whether that man from the future was still alive or already rotting in the ground, I couldn't say for sure. But one thing was clear—Moriarty was following whatever trail that man left behind, pushing toward some endgame I couldn't even begin to see.

I leaned forward slightly, eyes locked on her. "Can I ask you one last thing, since you're all being so damn vague with me?"

She gave me a small nod.

"Do you know the name Sherlock Holmes?"

Her head tilted to the side, brows furrowing slightly as if I'd just asked her the most random question in the world.

That tiny reaction told me everything—it was clear she had no clue who or what that was.

Which led me to believe something else entirely.

Sherlock Holmes and James Moriarty weren't just random names—they were characters straight out of The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes, a collection of short stories created by an Earth writer.

Which meant... this wasn't some coincidence. The name James Moriarty had to have been picked up from somewhere, most likely from someone in the future who knew about Earth.

And if that was the case...

There was a damn good chance someone here wasn't originally from this world at all.

"His world was so bleak that he had to come back to the past, huh?" I muttered under my breath, the thought clicking together like the last piece of a puzzle sliding into place.

It's the kind of thing you see in stories—when the future's a hopeless wasteland and someone gets the chance to time travel, of course they'd try to rewrite history, to fix everything before it collapsed.

So... was Earth's future really that far gone? Bad enough for someone to throw themselves back into the past to change it?

Then again, I couldn't say with absolute certainty that the guy was from Earth. It was possible he'd just heard the name Moriarty from someone else entirely.

Even with the little I got from this exchange, it was enough to push my understanding a step forward. Knowing Moriarty was linked to a man from the future was something—but it still wasn't enough. I was still missing too many crucial pieces, too much context, to build any real, solid picture.

I'd need more.

But judging from the way Marie held herself, I knew I wasn't getting anything else out of her today.

"Well, for now, I'm heading out. We'll talk again sometime, Marie," I told her, pushing myself up from my seat.

"Please do, Leon," she said with a small, warm smile. "I would love to have more conversations with you."

I walked out of the cell, letting the door click shut behind me.

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"Nghhh, ahhh...!"

Her moans spilled out in sharp, breathless waves, echoing and bouncing off the cold stone walls of the confined space we were in. The air was heavy—thick with heat, sweat, and the raw scent of sex.

Right now, I was buried deep inside Bernadette, fucking her hard in a rough doggy style.

It wasn't just a position for her—it was her favorite. She'd told me once that it made her feel completely dominated, controlled... and she craved that feeling. The idea of surrendering everything to me, her body, her breath, her pleasure—it turned her on more than anything else.

And hell, I wasn't complaining.

"Ahnnnn, ah, ah, ahhngghh... M-Master, that feels so good...~ I'm cummingg~!"

Her voice broke and trembled, her body tightening around me as she tried to hold herself up. I kept my pace, driving into her harder, until my own restraint started to shatter.

"Hngghhhhhhhhhhhh!!!" she cried out, clenching her teeth as her pussy tightened like a vice around my cock.

The sudden, relentless squeeze was too much—my cock throbbed, then erupted, shooting thick ropes of sperm deep inside her. I filled her until she was brimming, until I could feel the heat of it spilling back around me.

Her back arched violently, her eyes rolled back into her head, and her mouth hung open in a perfect, messy ahegao expression.

When the waves of her orgasm finally started to fade, her strength gave out. She slumped forward, trembling, her breath ragged. I eased her down onto the bed and slowly pulled out, the slick, wet pop echoing in the air.

"Haaa... haa...~" she panted, chest rising and falling fast.

It had been a while since we last fucked, so taking this chance felt damn good—better than I'd even expected.

With her lying beside me, her head resting on my arm like it was her pillow, my mind drifted elsewhere. Thoughts I'd been burying started creeping back.

Why... and how was I reincarnated here?

Was there a plan? Some hidden ploy? Did someone specifically choose to drag me into this world at this exact point in time?

Lilith had never said a word about why I was here. No reason and no explanation at all. Just... here I was.

And yet, living here... I couldn't say I regretted it. I'd built something bigger than I ever could have imagined. A business empire powerful enough to rival the wealth of royalty, women I loved by my side, and even a child of my own.

It felt like nothing could possibly go wrong.

But then again... what if there was a reason I was reborn here? What if all of this wasn't just random chance?

I had no answers. Only questions. And the lack of context was eating at me.

"Master, what are you thinking about?" Bernadette's soft voice pulled me back. She must have noticed something in my expression.

"Bernadette," I said, turning to her, "I want you to go to the underground for me. Tell Sandra to help you with it. I need you to find my sister."

Her eyes widened. "Y-Your sister?"

"Her name's Elise," I told her. "If you find her, tell her I want to meet."

I'd tried contacting her before, but wherever she was, it was completely out of reach—not even a faint smartphone signal.

There were only three places I could think of where she might be—the demon lands, the Empire, or deep in the underground.

Chapter 853: Secrets And Truths (3)

Meanwhile, in the underground society...

Elise's POV

It had been quite some time since I last set foot in this place, yet the moment I walked in, it felt oddly unfamiliar. The stench hit me harder than before—it was thick, sour, and rotten—clinging to the air like a curse that refused to fade away. It seeped into the walls, into the ground, and into the people themselves. It wasn't pleasant, but it was exactly what I expected from this pit.

The faces here hadn't changed much. This place was crawling with the kind of people you'd see in the filthiest, most dangerous neighborhoods. Shifty eyes darting around, hushed conversations in the shadows, bandits leaning lazily against crumbling walls while keeping their hands far too close to their weapons. The whole atmosphere felt like it was constantly on edge, as if the wrong glance could ignite a fight.

The underground society... truly, if there was any place in the world that could rival the demon continent in danger, it was here. The demon continent was known as a land untouched by humans, a realm of death where survival was a fantasy. But this place—this pit crawling with scum—was different. Humans could walk here, but the danger was no less real. Death lurked in every alley, and the wrong step could end with a knife in your throat.

"There's a lot of magic knights here nowadays..." I muttered under my breath, my gaze sweeping across the scene.

Dozens of them. Men and women dressed in neat, polished uniforms that didn't belong in a place like this. They stood in groups, watching, talking amongst themselves, their presence cutting through the chaos like clean blades through grime.

What unsettled me was that they weren't here to arrest anyone. Their blades weren't drawn, nor were they rounding up the thieves and killers that walked openly in the streets. No, they were simply here—stationed, watching, and doing something I couldn't quite put my finger on.

Something was moving beneath the surface. I could feel it.

Thankfully, they weren't here to start a war. If the magic knights ever decided to fight the underground society head-on, it would be nothing short of a massacre. Blood would paint these streets, bodies would pile up in corners, and the entire place would burn.

I walked further, weaving past the crowd of criminals and knights until I arrived at the place I was headed.

"Elise? What do you want? The usual?" an old man asked, glancing at me while rubbing a mug with a worn rag. His voice was gruff, but familiar.

"Yes," I replied without hesitation.

"Coming right up, then."

He turned and began filling the mug with beer, the faint foam rising and spilling slightly over the rim.

This was the best beer I'd ever had, and I wasn't exaggerating. I didn't care how filthy the place was, how rotten the air smelled, or how suspicious the company was—this beer was worth it. After everything I'd done today, I deserved this. Cold, sharp, bitter beer sliding down my throat... it was heaven.

But as I took my first sip, I could feel it. Eyes.

I didn't even need to look up to know where they came from.

The knights.

They weren't just watching the crowd. They were watching me. Staring. Waiting.

I set the mug down and asked the old man quietly, "How long are all these people supposed to stay here?"

"Well, they said they're on official business," he said with a shrug. "So I don't think they'll be leaving anytime soon."

Official business, huh? What kind of mission would force them to linger in this place for so long?

"Haven't you tried digging into it?" I asked, my tone sharp.

"Not really, no," he replied honestly. "At first, I did. But they aren't doing anything shady. And besides, they paid me and a couple others a hefty sum to make sure no one complains about their presence. They're not making trouble, and they're all staying at that person's place... so we can't really do anything about it."

I leaned back, the mug still in my hand. "I see... So that's why no one's complaining."

Normally, the underground society wouldn't tolerate outsiders, especially knights. This place was ruled by crime, not law. But if the de facto mayor of this pit allowed it, then the rest would stay quiet. Money and influence spoke louder than fear.

I continued drinking, but then—

"Elise Eclair?"

The voice came from behind me, firm and cold. At the same time, I felt the sharp press of steel against my side. A blade.

I didn't flinch. I took another sip of beer, swallowed slowly, and set the mug down.

"Yes? What do you want?" I asked casually.

"I want you to come with us. Peacefully," the knight said.

"Peacefully?" I scoffed. "With a sword pressed against my back? That's what you call peaceful?"

"We're taking precautions. We've heard of your... unsavory tactics. We want to make sure you don't try anything."

I couldn't help but smile. That was only natural, wasn't it? Still, they had it all wrong.

"Ah... but you're mistaken," I said, smirking. "If you think I can't do anything just because my back's turned, then you're absurdly naïve."

In the next instant, the knight's hand was gone. Severed cleanly at the wrist.

Blood spurted.

"W-What?! Ahhhhhh! M-My hand! My hand!!!"

The knight dropped to his knees, screaming in agony as he clutched the bloody stump with his remaining hand. His cries echoed through the underground hall, mixing with the whispers and gasps of onlookers.

"I can still kill you without even looking," I said flatly, my voice as cold as the steel they dared to point at me.

"Y-You bitch! What have you done?!"

Steel sang as more swords were unsheathed, their edges glinting in the dim light. Knights stepped forward, their blades raised, but I saw it in their eyes—fear.

It wasn't bravery driving them. It was desperation. They wanted to survive, not win. They had already done their research on me. They knew exactly who I was and what I could do. And that knowledge left them terrified.

"You all... don't fight her," a new voice cut through the tension.

It was feminine, though rough enough that you could mistake it for a man's at first.

The crowd parted, and she walked forward. A woman with purplish-dark hair that cascaded around her shoulders, her eyes a deep shade of the same color. Her expression was carved into a permanent scowl, her very presence pushing against the air like a storm.

The aura that radiated from her was immense. Heavy. Dangerous.

"I'll handle her myself," she said firmly.

Her hand rose, and with it, a blade materialized.

The sword pulsed with an ominous glow, its aura suffocating.

A cursed sword.

I narrowed my eyes. I was honestly surprised. Very few could even dare to wield such a thing. The drain on mana was catastrophic, the cost so steep it could strip you dry and leave nothing but a husk behind.

But this woman—this stranger—held it effortlessly. No trembling. No strain. She gripped the weapon as if it were made for her, as if it was an extension of her very soul.

I could tell right away. This wasn't an ordinary human. She was something else entirely.

Still... even as the cursed blade hummed with power in her hand, I couldn't believe she'd be able to defeat me.

Chapter 854: Secrets And Truths (4)

Before the confrontation against Elise

Shredica's POV

When I woke up, the first thing that greeted me was a dull, heavy pain running down my back. It wasn't just a simple ache and it felt like my whole body had been pressed against stones all night.

It's been a while since my mornings started like this, with that same stiffness crawling through my muscles, the same kind of discomfort gnawing at me as soon as my eyes opened.

It's already been a year since I came to this place, but no matter how much time passed, it still felt new and was almost foreign.

Like the first day I stumbled into this world with me being confused, disoriented, and carrying that strange sense that everything around me was familiar, yet not at all. Even now, despite all this time, it still felt like I was stepping into it for the very first time. That eerie feeling hadn't left me.

"Shredica?"

A voice came from beyond the curtain. Not a door, just that thin cloth separating me from the outside world.

"I'm awake," I replied, my voice still groggy.

"Good," the voice answered, steady and calm. "Come. Veronica wants to tell you something."

With that, I pushed myself up, every movement making the soreness in my body complain, and stepped out of the bed. The morning air slipped through the cracks of the tent as I moved the curtain aside.

Waiting there was Laurel. She stood firm, posture sharp and eyes clear. She was someone who always stuck close to the commander of the magic knights, practically her shadow.

As I stepped outside, the camp came into view with rows of magic knights scattered across the field, training with weapons clashing, magic sparks bursting against shields, their shouts and commands echoing through the cold morning air. Dust and sweat hung thick as a reminder of their relentless drills.

At the far end of the grounds stood another tent which was larger and guarded by knights posted firmly at its entrance. That was the tent reserved for the vice commander herself.

And inside... was her.

Veronica Éclair.

The vice commander of the magic knights, and a woman whose strength was said to be unmatched. She was someone capable of breaking anything in her way, shattering obstacles with ease. That overwhelming presence was exactly why I had grown to respect her.

But there was something else about her.... it was something familiar and something that tugged faintly at the back of my memory. For some reason, she reminded me of Leon. It wasn't the way she looked, but the feeling she carried. The same kind of mystery that seemed to wrap around them both. That unshakable aura you couldn't pin down, but couldn't ignore either.

"It seems you slept well, Shredica," Veronica said the moment I entered. Her voice was calm, yet sharp and it was colder than usual, though that was just her natural tone. She didn't sound angry, and her face didn't show irritation. This was simply how she always was. "You still have saliva on your cheek, and your hair's sticking to it."

I blinked, touching the side of my face. Right... I was dragged out of bed without even fixing myself.

"Why did you call me?" I asked.

"I'm giving you a mission," she said, her gaze unwavering. "The leader of the Arachnid Sisters is expected to return here soon. I want you to bring her to me."

The Arachnid Sisters.

Even the name carried weight. A group of deadly assassins... women who thrived in shadows, who could vanish from sight and slip through the cracks of any defense. They were infamous for both thievery and assassinations, taking on the dirtiest, most dangerous jobs.

And their leader... her reputation painted her as someone who could kill anyone she set her eyes on.

"I should warn you," Veronica continued, her tone like ice. "Catching her won't be easy. She's one of the Nine Fangs."

The Nine Fangs.

They were women who stood at the top of deadly organizations, each one commanding fear and respect with each one dangerous in their own right. To face someone like that was no simple task.

"What do you want me to do with her?" I asked slowly. "Bring you her head?"

"You must bring her alive," Veronica replied, without hesitation. "She may know the key to what we've been searching for."

I looked at her carefully.

She sat with her hands entwined, her face holding that same aloof, distant look. Yet behind that expression was something much heavier and it was something that carried the weight of absolute necessity.

Whatever she was after, it was important. Crucial, even. And that meant there was no room for failure. I had to bring that woman back alive.

"Here," Veronica said suddenly, holding out a box.

I tilted my head, puzzled. Slowly, I stepped forward and took it from her hands.

"Open it," she ordered.

I lifted the lid, and what greeted me inside made my chest tighten.

A blade.

But not just any blade.

It was dark, ominous, and the kind of weapon that seemed to radiate malice. Its surface shimmered faintly under the light, but instead of shining, it almost seemed to absorb it. Just looking at it was enough to tell me that it was dangerous.

"You can use that," Veronica said, watching my reaction. "It's a cursed sword. I keep it for the rare times I might face someone I can't take down. Not that it's ever happened. I've never needed it. But for you... you can use it on this mission."

My eyes lingered on the dagger.

"That isn't something just anyone can hold," Laurel warned from the side, her voice steady but sharp. "It drains mana endlessly, until the wielder is nothing but a husk. My advice is that you use it with caution."

I reached out and wrapped my fingers around the hilt.

The moment I touched it, I braced myself for the pull and for that draining sensation Lilia warned about... but it never came.

Instead, the weapon sat quietly in my hand.

"...Hm? Interesting." Veronica's lips curved into the faintest smile. "It seems the blade accepts you. That's good. It won't dry you out."

"It really is surprising," Laurel added, her brows furrowing slightly. "For her to hold it without reaction... it's almost as if the sword found its rightful owner."

I held the dagger for a while, feeling its weight, before carefully setting it back inside the box. Then I looked up, meeting Veronica's eyes.

"When am I supposed to do it?" I asked.

"Oh?" Her tone shifted slightly, as though she was amused. "So eager already?"

Her gaze sharpened.

"Two days from now. According to a little bird of mine, that's when she'll be back from wherever she went. That's when you strike."

#### Chapter 855: Secrets And Truths (5)

We had been waiting for a while, and finally, just as Veronica's information said, the person appeared.

My eyes scanned over the squad that came with me, their armor faintly glinting under the dim light. I gave a quick gesture with my hand, a silent order telling them to stay where they were. We'd approach her slowly and carefully. She wasn't someone we could just recklessly rush into.

I signaled again, my palm flat, telling them to hold until I gave the go.

But then, one of them moved—ignoring me completely.

Of course.

None of them liked me in the first place.

The knights weren't fond of me for one simple reason and that was that I hadn't gone through the same path as them. They all graduated, trained, and bled their way through the academy to earn their place. As for me... I was pushed straight into the role of a magic knight, not because of hard work in their eyes, but because Veronica recommended me.

And Veronica wasn't loved either. She had also bypassed the traditional path and rising to her position without even attending the Gold Class academy that every magic knight was expected to graduate from.

They hated her at first. They looked at her like she was unworthy. But eventually, she proved herself... so much so that they couldn't deny her anymore.

I, on the other hand... hadn't proven anything yet. And so every one of their eyes carried the same weight with doubt, disdain, and a kind of smugness that came with believing they were better than me.

And because of that, they ignored me. They didn't trust me enough to follow orders.

That kind of arrogance was deadly.

If we were dealing with some random thug off the street, maybe it wouldn't matter. They'd overwhelm him with sheer numbers. But this woman—this person—was no thug. She was a predator.

And it cost one of them his arm.

The sickening sound of flesh tearing, followed by his scream, rang out in the air. Blood poured down his armored sleeve, splattering the floor in thick droplets. He collapsed to the ground, clutching the space where his hand used to be.

Lucky for him, there were magic knights who could knit bone and flesh back together. If not for that, he'd spend the rest of his life staring at a stump where his hand once was.

"Heh...?" The woman finally spoke, her voice calm, almost playful. "It seems someone really capable suddenly decided to come and ask me something."

The woman in question—the one we came for—was Elise Eclair.

Leader of a notorious organization of women assassins.

She stood there, being calm and collected with her presence sharp like a blade pressed against your throat. She wasn't just dangerous.

She was the embodiment of death walking in human form. They said she could kill with nothing more than a flick of her fingers. Looking at her now, I believed it.

As I watched her, my eyes caught them... The thin, gleaming strands stretched out around us, almost invisible to the naked eye. They ran across the room, crisscrossing the space, tangling around the knights who had moved carelessly.

They didn't even notice. But I did. And it sent a chill running through my spine.

All she had to do was twitch her wrist, and those strings would tighten, slicing them apart like meat on a butcher's table. She could shred them all before they even knew what killed them.

A woman like her... she wasn't just dangerous. She was lethal.

"Oh? You can see my strings?" Elise tilted her head slightly, a smile tugging at her lips. "Impressive. I never would've guessed you had eyes sharp enough for that."

So the others hadn't realized. That's why she was so infamous and as to why victims never knew how they died. They couldn't even see the blades that cut them down.

If she so much as waved her hand, this bar would be painted red in an instant.

While I was focused on her, movement caught my eye. The bartender behind her suddenly lunged, wrapping his arm around her and pressing a knife against her throat.

"I thought so..." Elise said, her tone almost bored. "So you're the one who sold me out, huh?"

She didn't flinch. Not a single ounce of fear. She acted as though the cold steel biting into her neck was nothing more than an inconvenience.

"You know the rules in the underground," the bartender sneered. "Live dirty, and you survive. We're paid to do dirty work, and betrayal? That's just part of the game." He pressed the blade harder against her skin. "Don't blame me. They promised me a hefty sum to turn you in. So I think it's only fair I take it. Don't you?"

"I see..." Elise's voice was still calm, almost amused. "Well, I don't blame you at all. Just... don't blame me either when you get killed."

That's when I saw it.

There was a flash at the edge of my vision. A glint of silver, almost invisible, connected to his fingers.

Her strings.

Before he even realized what was happening, Elise flicked her hand.

The bartender screamed. His fingers split clean from his hand, flying through the air before hitting the ground with a wet slap.

"Urk...!"

"Thankfully," Elise said, watching him writhe, "I still have a little sympathy for you. Your beer really is delicious, after all."

He crumpled to his knees, clutching his bloody, fingerless hand, gritting his teeth against the pain.

"Now then..." Elise's eyes slid back to me. Her smile widened. "Shall we dance? You can all come at me if you like. It doesn't matter—I'll kill every last one of you."

"Don't move!" I barked at the knights.

They froze, startled by the tone of my voice.

Right now, they were caught in her web. Every step as well as every twitch of a muscle would only make it worse. If they moved, she'd tear them apart.

"If you don't want to die, then don't move. Not a single step," I said coldly, my voice cutting through the tension.

Finally, they seemed to understand. They held their ground, rooted where they stood with sweat dripping down their faces.

#### Chapter 856: Secrets And Truths (6)

I tightened my grip on the sword Veronica had given me, my palms slick with sweat and trembling slightly as if the weight of the blade itself was testing me. My heart pounded so hard in my chest that it almost drowned out the sound of my own breath with every beat hammering like war drums as I stared down Elise.

Then—suddenly—light flickered at my side. My instincts screamed at me louder than words ever could. I ducked, just in time, as a silver thread sliced through the air, cutting exactly where my head had been a mere heartbeat earlier. The sharpness of the wire left a hiss in the wind, like death whispering past my ear.

Another string followed, this one faster, sharper and merciless. It came straight for me, aiming to carve me down without hesitation.

I twisted, using the momentum from my desperate duck, raising my blade with every ounce of strength I had left. Sparks burst into the air as steel clashed against that shimmering thread, the shrill metallic scrape ringing in my ears.

"Oh?" Elise's smile stretched wider, her eyes shining with a predator's gleam. "So you can dodge that, huh? Interesting."

Her long fingers twitched again, delicate yet terrifying, as threads glinted faintly in the dim light. It looked like she was weaving a deadly web, strands catching the glow and shimmering with lethal beauty.

"Well then..." she tilted her head, voice curling with amusement, "...how about you dance for me some more?"

Her hands moved, and then the storm came. A wave of strings exploded forward, slicing through the air with impossible precision, each one aimed with surgical accuracy to cut me down.

The speed—the sheer crushing weight of their power—was beyond anything I thought I could endure. The wires screamed as they cut through the air, and the force behind them was strong enough to split steel. It was almost unthinkable that I was still standing, still managing to deflect, still alive.

Maybe it was only because of the blade in my hand—Veronica's blade—that I hadn't already been reduced to ribbons.

"You've got some great moves," Elise said smoothly, watching me weave between her threads, her grin never fading. "But tell me—can you keep up?"

The wires blurred. Faster, sharper.

My eyes were darting everywhere, straining to follow every steel thread that came at me from all angles, every flick of her fingers birthing another slash of death.

But no matter how I twisted, no matter how I moved—

—I couldn't keep up.

She was just too fast.

"Ngh...!"

Pain flared. One thread slashed across my side, tearing deep. My teeth clenched so hard it felt like they would crack. The agony seared through me, hot and violent, like a bullet had just punched through my stomach.

"Fufufu..." Elise chuckled, her voice soft but sharp. "That was close. But... oh, look at you. That must hurt. Your guts are practically spilling out."

I stumbled, clutching my side, warm blood seeping through my fingers. My vision swayed from the pain, but then... strangely, it began to fade. The sharp sting slowly dulled, almost as if my body was fighting it back on its own.

"Hm?" Elise narrowed her eyes, her expression shifting with curiosity. "You're regenerating too fast."

I didn't think I was healing quickly. It didn't feel that way to me. But... was I?

Memories flickered—images from Earth, from the brutal campaigns I'd been part of. Fighting Infected. Cutting down enemies from opposing factions. Reclaiming islands so survivors could live again.

And through all of it—I healed. Faster than the others.

Faster than any human should have been able to.

I knew back then something was different. My wounds closed faster. My body mended quicker. Maybe it was the modifications they had done to me... or maybe something else I never fully understood.

They told me I was special. But no one ever explained what exactly that meant.

Still—fast or not, my healing wasn't perfect. It wasn't instant. A fatal strike could still end me in seconds.

I had to be careful.

"Oh well," Elise said, her grin returning, sharp and cruel. "I'll just have to slice you faster than you can regenerate."

Her hands blurred again—faster, smoother, like she was plucking invisible strings in a frantic symphony.

"Nghhh!"

The threads whipped out. Not just from the front anymore—no, this time they surrounded me. A crushing storm of wires from every direction, faster and faster, impossible to predict.

Panic clawed at me. This was getting worse. I couldn't keep track—

And then—

"Ah...!"

A sudden, blinding flash of pain exploded. My whole arm was gone.

Blood sprayed in the air in a violent arc, trailing behind the severed limb like a rocket tail. The arm landed on the ground with a sickening, wet thud. My hand was still gripping the sword tightly, even though it was no longer part of me.

"Nghhh...!"

Blood poured out of the stump, a fountain spraying across the floor, hot and sticky. My body trembled from the shock, my breaths coming in ragged gasps.

It was too much—I was losing too much. Too fast.

"Looks like that finally did you in, huh?" Elise said, though her voice now carried a note of disappointment. "So that's how fast you could go..."

But I barely heard her.

My mind was splitting apart.

It felt like someone had taken a massive hammer and slammed it into my skull, over and over, shattering bone and thought alike. The pain was so severe it blurred the edges of my vision, pounding in waves that made me want to scream.

I had never felt anything like this.

And then—suddenly—veins began to bulge beneath my skin, glowing, throbbing with a strange purplish light.

"Grr..."

My vision tinted purple, the world twisting, shifting. My thoughts felt like they were being smothered, taken over by something else entirely.

The agony was so intense I wanted to vomit, but my body wouldn't let me. Something inside was holding it back, forcing me to endure it.

And then... I lost control.

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Elise's POV

I froze, watching the woman in front of me as she suddenly let out a low, guttural growl.

Her skin was glowing faintly with that eerie purplish hue. Veins bulged under the surface, throbbing and spreading like cracks in glass.

She looked like she had snapped.

Her aura shifted—no, it transformed. It wasn't just different, it was overwhelming. I felt it press against me, heavy and suffocating, making my instincts scream.

This wasn't the same woman I had been toying with seconds ago. This was something else. Something dangerous.

Then—her stump moved.

The severed arm, the one lying on the floor, twitched unnaturally. And then—it lifted, dragging itself back toward her body.

I blinked in disbelief as the flesh reconnected with the stump, knitting itself together seamlessly, muscle and skin reforming as if nothing had happened.

She didn't just heal.

She reattached it like it was nothing.

In seconds—she was whole again.

And then... her eyes.

Her eyes glowed purple, completely consumed, no trace of humanity left in them.

Then—

She lunged.

The speed—god, the speed—was insane. Even I barely registered it. For the first time, I felt a chill of danger crawl up my spine. If I hadn't sensed her movement at the very last instant, if my instincts hadn't screamed—I wouldn't have blocked in time.

I steadied myself, staring at her again.

Those eyes—cold, empty, rabid.

There was no emotion and no hesitation.

Just pure frenzy.

Just pure rage.

Chapter 857: Secrets And Truths (7)

I didn't know why, but something about her had completely changed.

The way she moved with her being swift, sharp, and precise—wasn't like the woman I'd faced before. Every step she took carried weight, and her blows landed with force that seemed far stronger than

before. And that regeneration... it wasn't just fast, it was terrifying. Flesh mending in an instant, wounds closing as if they'd never been inflicted.

It was like something inside her had broken—no, snapped apart.

"You seem... very different from before. It's not like... you're human anymore," I muttered, my voice low, almost swallowed by the tension in the air. My fingers twitched, pulling invisible lines of power. Strings shot out, hundreds of them, swaying and lashing like a storm of blades around her as I swept my hands in wide arcs.

And yet—she brushed them aside. Effortlessly.

No... some of the strings did connect. I could hear the wet, sickening squelches of flesh tearing. I saw the faint spray of blood against the air. But her face didn't even flinch. It was like pain didn't exist for her anymore. She didn't care if her body was being torn apart. She didn't care if she lived... or if she died.

"Even a wild beast still thinks of self-preservation," I sneered, lips curling into a sharp smirk.

She was strong, I had to give her that. But strength alone isn't everything. She lacked precision and she lacked grace. Her movements were wild, uncontrolled, and unpredictable. That chaos gave her momentum, but at the same time, it left her open. And unpredictability, no matter how sharp, couldn't outweigh inevitability.

Because here, in this space I had already woven my strings into, there was no advantage she could claim. There was no escape.

There was no escape from death itself.

I was born from the power of our mother, Lilith. Her essence flowed in my veins as well as in my very being. And with that power, there was no one—no one—who could ever hope to defeat me... unless they too carried Mother's blood.

But this woman? She was nothing like that. She wasn't born from Lilith.

Which meant—

"This is the end," I whispered, my voice steady.

She stepped right where I wanted her to.

And then, with my hand curling into a tight fist, the countless strings hidden all around the space suddenly snapped to life. They rushed inward like a thousand blades, closing in on her from every direction, the air itself screaming as they cut through it.

"Now... die—"

"That's enough."

A woman's voice, calm yet commanding, cut through everything like a blade.

My strings—every single one of them—vanished in an instant. The trap I'd spun so carefully, gone as though it had never existed.

It was like my power itself had been erased.

How...?

"Shredica is a valuable asset to my plans, you see..."

The voice carried deeper now as a figure stepped into the bar, her presence washing over the room like a tide.

The moment my eyes landed on her, my blood surged, like fire racing through my veins.

That feeling... I knew it. I had felt it before—

With Leon.

"Fufufu... Is this what they mean when they say your blood recognizes its own? When you meet someone you're related to, and your very veins stir at the sight?" She smiled slyly, her tone dripping with amusement.

"Y-You're..."

"Veronica Eclair. That's the name I was given, isn't it? You're the one who left me in that place, right?" she said, smiling as though she already knew the answer.

My chest tightened.

Veronica.

This woman... she was one of the five parts of Lilith. Which made her... my sister. My younger sister.

"Veronica!" I shouted, a rush of emotion breaking out of me. My arms spread wide as I lunged toward her, desperate to embrace her.

But she disappeared before I could touch her.

Her voice echoed around me, almost playful.

"It seems you can't contain your excitement, Elise Eclair. Or should I say... dear big sister?"

"Well, of course! I am your big sister!" I shouted back, giddy, almost trembling from the weight of it all.

I couldn't hold back the emotions surging through me. After all this time, after searching endlessly—I finally found her.

"I've been looking for you everywhere! Finally... I finally found you!"

Her crimson eyes softened, but her lips still curved into that sly smile.

"I'm glad you feel that way. Truly, I am. But..." Her voice dropped lower and colder. "Do you really think this is the right time for a happy reunion, dear sister?"

Before I could respond, something slammed into me.

It wasn't physical. It was worse.

A crushing weight bore down on me, like invisible hands pushing against every inch of my body. My chest tightened, my knees buckle and the very air felt heavy as if it was turning to stone.

I looked up, struggling to breathe, and saw her hand stretched out toward me.

"I'm sorry, but... could you come with me for a moment?"

Her words were soft, almost kind.

And then, darkness swallowed me whole.

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Shredica's POV

I woke with a start, a sharp ache burning in my back. My body felt heavy and sluggish.

Blinking, I realized I was lying on a bed, the ceiling above me blurred in my vision. A medical knight was standing nearby, checking me over with steady hands.

"W-Where... am I?" My voice cracked as I forced the words out.

"Ah, you've woken. Good. I'll call Captain Laurel immediately. Please wait here."

The knight hurried off, leaving me sitting up slowly.

Why... was I here?

No... I remembered. I had been defeated.

A bitter taste filled my mouth.

I lost.

To Elise Eclair.

As the thought sank deeper, the door opened and Laurel stepped in, her usual composed presence filling the room.

"So, you've finally woken. That's good. Do you feel anything unusual? Any pain?"

"Not that I can tell," I answered, shaking my head.

Laurel tilted her head, her eyes narrowing slightly. "It's strange, though. The others told me you sewed your arm back on yourself during the fight. Did you lie about being skillless?"

Her words froze me.

I hadn't lied. I was skillless. But... sewing my arm back? I didn't remember doing anything like that. My mind was blank on the matter. And yet, when I glanced down at my arm—it was whole. Perfectly reattached. It shouldn't even be there. It had been severed.

"...I don't know anything about that," I muttered.

"Well, it seems you truly don't," Laurel sighed, rubbing her forehead. "Either way, Vice Commander Veronica wants you to come with her. She intends to speak with Elise Eclair."

"...Why me?"

Laurel only shrugged. "No idea. She only said since you fought Elise, you've earned the privilege to know the truth. Like why their last names are the same."

Her words struck a nerve. That question had been gnawing at me too.

Veronica and Elise.

There was something about them—an aura as well as a presence—that felt identical. And when I looked closely, they shared features too. Same black hair. Same red eyes. The resemblance was undeniable, though Veronica looked a little younger.

But it wasn't just them.

There was someone else who carried that same feeling.

Leon.

The thought wouldn't leave me.

Was there truly a connection between the three of them?

That was what I had to find out.

Chapter 858: Secrets And Truths (8)

I made my way to the place Veronica told me to go.

It wasn't just any house as it belonged to some influential figure who acted as the de facto mayor of this lawless territory.

Even in a place drowned in crime, chaos, and violence, it was clear they still needed someone to hold the reins. No matter how unruly, no matter how wild, there had to be a figure of authority keeping the balance. Without that—without someone maintaining even the smallest thread of order—this entire place would collapse on itself. It would rot from the inside out until the very idea of such a lawless haven ceased to exist.

That's why, despite the filth and corruption, they still needed someone to enforce the so-called natural order of things.

When I got closer, I could already hear the moans, faint at first, then clearer the deeper I walked. Lustful, desperate, shameless sounds echoing through the corridors. I didn't bother tracing where it came from. Whatever was happening behind those walls wasn't my business. I had my own reason for being here.

I kept moving, my footsteps carrying me down into the depths of the house, until the air grew damp and suffocating. The walls turned darker, the floors uneven, and soon I came upon something that looked like a prison.

A dungeon. That's what it resembled, anyway.

The moment I stepped inside, the stench hit me like a wall. The foul, gag-inducing smell of rotting flesh clung to the air and it was heavy and suffocating. It was like walking into the belly of a corpse, the air so rancid I almost gagged.

"Fufufu... I'm sorry our reunion had to be like this, my dear big sister."

That voice—Veronica's.

Big sister?

The words froze me in place. So that was it. They were siblings.

"Oh? You've arrived, Shredica? Perfect timing. She just woke up," Veronica said, her tone smooth.

"Why'd you call me instead of Laurel?" I asked, narrowing my eyes.

"I thought it'd be far more interesting if you were the one to hear this. After all, you're more connected to us than you realize."

Her words sent a strange unease crawling down my spine. What the hell was she implying?

"Now then, my dear sister," Veronica continued, her voice dripping with amusement. "Where is Lilith's dungeon?"

"Huh? Lilith's dungeon? Why do you want to know that?" the other woman—Elise—answered.

"Well, I need an artifact that lies within. Something that could help me. So... why don't you tell me? Since you're a part of Lilith herself, I assume you know exactly where it is."

Lilith's dungeon.

The name alone carried weight. Lilith was one of the greatest dragons in existence, a being whose power shook the world.

Veronica had once told me Lilith was long dead, but before her end, she had shattered herself into five fragments.

Fragments meant to bring her back.

So that's what this was about. That was why Veronica was here.

She wasn't just searching for treasure. Her true goal... was to revive Lilith. Or I'm assuming she was.

"I don't know. I've never stepped foot inside Lilith's dungeon," Elise said flatly.

"What do you mean you've never been there? You're the oldest among us! Don't you think Lilith would've shown you something before she disappeared?" Veronica said.

"I really don't know. More importantly, can you untie your big sister already? I can't hug you like this."

"Tch. So even after coming all this way and waiting, we've gotten nothing... Was it a mistake to even come here?" Veronica mumbled, her voice low but sharp. Then, with a pause, she added. "How about Leon? Does he know?"

Leon.

The moment his name dropped, everything fell into place.

These two... they were connected to him.

It wasn't just a guess. From the way they carried themselves, the way they fought, even their appearance and the aura that clung to them—it was unmistakable.

That was why Veronica had unsettled me from the very beginning.

She was related to Leon.

Well, I kinda guessed that already.

"Well, you and Leon were born at the same time, so maybe he doesn't know. Not like you or me," Elise said quietly.

"And what about the others?"

"Leonora and Estelle? I doubt they know either. Leonora was born a little later than the two of you, still on the same day. Estelle... she was the only one who came out a year later."

"I see..." Veronica's voice dropped, cold and cutting, though there was something beneath it—a weight, maybe even sadness. But it was buried so deep I couldn't be sure.

"This is pointless. We came here for nothing..." she muttered.

Elise looked at her and asked, "What kind of artifact are you even searching for?"

"The book containing the spell that summons heroes from another world."

My breath caught.

That was it. That was exactly what I'd been searching for all this time.

"I thought the spell was locked away in the royal castle, guarded by the magic knights?" Elise asked, confused.

"That's just a fraction of it," Veronica explained, her tone sharp. "The real spell is longer. Two entire books long, written in full. And only someone with immense mana and power can cast it—only they could open a rift through time and space."

My voice trembled as I asked. "I-Is it possible... to use it to send the summoned ones back? To return them to where they came from?"

"It's possible," Veronica replied without hesitation. "It's been done before."

If that was true—if that was really possible—then I had a chance.

I could go back.

Back to my world.

We just needed that artifact. We just needed to find the dungeon. And then... my path home would be clear.

"Then... I think I know someone capable enough to help us with this search." I told her.

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Leon's POV

"What the hell...?"

My phone buzzed in my hand, the ringtone cutting through the silence. But it wasn't the sound that made me mutter those words.

It was the name flashing on the screen.

Shredica.

She was calling me.

Was it an accident? A mis-tap? Or just a butt dial?

I scratched the back of my neck, staring at her name glowing on the display. After a second of hesitation, I sighed and pressed the button.

Might as well answer.

Chapter 859: Leon's and Elise's Reunion (1)

Shredica's POV

Now I finally understood why Veronica told me that I was a lot more connected to them than I thought.

It wasn't because of some vague sense of belonging, nor was it because of anything Elise or the others had said. It was because of one thing and that was my connection to Leon.

I had called him earlier, asking about the dungeon of Lilith, hoping he might know something. But, as expected, he didn't seem to know a single thing about it either. His voice carried that familiar tone, but... nothing more.

"I see... so you're one of Leon's old academy mates, huh?" Elise's voice broke my thoughts. She tilted her head slightly, her sharp eyes narrowing just a little. "Is Leon okay? I haven't been able to play with him lately."

Her words carried a teasing weight, but beneath that, I could hear something else and that was curiosity or maybe even a little impatience.

I only shrugged in response. Truth was, I had no idea what Leon was doing right now. It had been more than a year since the last time I saw him. And in that year, so much had changed.

Since I was recommended straight into becoming a magic knight instead of going the long, conventional way of graduating into the gold class, I never got to stay at the academy for as long as the others. My path was different and more detached.

"It's been a year since I last saw him," I said finally, my tone steady but carrying a faint nostalgia. "But when I heard his voice earlier, he sounded fine enough. So, I suppose he's doing well."

"I wish I had my phone with me right now," Elise muttered with a frustrated sigh. "I want to let him know that I already found one of his sisters, Veronica."

"I don't plan on 'playing' with Leon the way you do, Elise," Veronica suddenly cut in, her voice sharp with disapproval.

Elise let out a sly chuckle. "Come on now. We're basically siblings, aren't we? We all came from the same origin."

Veronica's eyes hardened, her tone dropping low. "And doing something like that could very well allow the resurrection of Lilith. I won't let this world fall into destruction like it did during her time."

The instant she said those words, the air shifted. Elise's expression changed with her playful smirk fading into something colder and darker.

"So that's how you want to treat our creator, Veronica?" Elise's words carried venom, her stare drilling into her sister.

"I wouldn't call someone my mother—much less my creator—if I've never even seen her myself," Veronica shot back without hesitation. "And only recently did I even learn about my connection to Lilith."

Up until now, I've just been living with my family, loving them as well as cherishing them. So no, I can't consider anyone else as such outside of them."

"You're not even going to consider me your sister?" Elise's tone was sharp, though there was an edge of hurt hidden deep within it.

"I could just treat you as someone who happens to share the same name as me. That's all," Veronica replied coldly.

The tension between them thickened instantly. The air was suffocating, almost heavy enough to choke on. If tension had a shape, it would have been sharp enough to cut flesh—it felt like the kind of silence that could be sliced through by a blade.

It was the first time I had ever seen Veronica like this.

"My, my~... You're not as sweet as your twin brother, huh?" Elise purred, though her eyes were like daggers. "Your twin brother is always so sweet to me. So I assumed you'd be the same."

In the blink of an eye, the binds that had been restraining her to the chair snapped apart, scattering like threads of broken glass.

"Well," Veronica said, her eyes narrowing as she reached for her blade, "I wouldn't be sweet. We grew up in completely different circumstances. And unlike Leon, I'm not a man who's going to drool over you."

Elise smirked, almost mockingly. "Leon is just a man driven by his lust. Drooling over me is only natural for him."

Veronica's hand moved with certainty as she unsheathed her sword, the metallic sound cutting through the suffocating silence. She shifted into her stance, the edge of her weapon glinting under the light.

"I didn't want it to come to this, and I don't want to hurt you," Elise said, her voice calm but cold as ice. "But you hurt your big sister's feelings. And for that, I'll discipline you."

Veronica leaned forward slightly, her eyes glowing with amusement. "I see... Then come at me."

And then—

I felt it instantly. A massive surge of aura erupted from both of them, flooding the room with oppressive energy. It pressed down on me like a storm, making the very air feel heavier and harder to breathe.

But the fight itself?

I couldn't even process it.

It was too fast.

My eyes couldn't keep up. The clash was over before my brain even realized it had begun.

By the time my senses caught up, Veronica's blade was pressed firmly against Elise's neck, while one of Elise's shimmering threads was looped tightly around Veronica's throat.

A perfect deadlock.

"It seems your string work is so fast, my ability couldn't keep up," Veronica admitted, her eyes sharp and unblinking.

"And I didn't expect you to get your blade so close to my neck either," Elise said with a sly grin. "As expected of my sibling—you're impressive."

Slowly and deliberately, both of them retracted their weapons.

I couldn't even begin to understand why they had started fighting so suddenly—only to stop just as suddenly.

"I'll help you find the dungeon," Elise said at last, her tone steady once more. "I think the entire Arachnid Sisters would be a valuable addition to this hunt, don't you agree?"

She wasn't wrong. For an underground organization like the Arachnid Sisters, who practically lived and breathed the ins and outs of the underworld, this kind of task would be far easier.

Veronica, however, wasn't swayed so easily.

"I don't think the Magic Knights would like hearing about a vice commander who doesn't trust her own people and instead seeks help from vigilantes," she said, her voice sharp. "But... with your help, we might find it faster. So fine—I'll agree to your help. But it stays a secret."

"That's fine with me," Elise said with a shrug. "As long as I'm helping, nothing else matters. Besides, I was looking into Lilith myself. So this lines up for me." She glanced at me then. "I'm assuming she'll keep her mouth shut about it."

Both pairs of eyes locked on me.

"As long as I get what I want, then everything is fine with me," I said flatly.

"What do you want, Shredica?" Veronica asked, her eyes narrowing slightly.

"To return to my world," I answered without hesitation. "As long as I can do that, nothing else matters."

The two of them exchanged glances. A silent understanding seemed to pass between them before they both nodded in agreement, accepting my words without question.

But nine days after this conversation, Elise announced she was heading back to the Milham Kingdom.

## Chapter 860: Leon's and Elise's Reunion (2)

Elise's POV

It had been such a long time since I came back to this country.

After spending more than a month hidden away, I finally decided to return to that place. The underground. I thought it would just be a quiet trip back, but then... someone appeared before me. She stepped out of nowhere, introduced herself calmly as a member of the Shadows, and spoke words that made my heart skip a beat.

She said my brother, Leon, wanted to meet me.

The instant I heard that, a rush of warmth exploded in my chest. My heart raced so fast it almost hurt. Leon... he sought me out himself? My beloved brother? It was only natural that joy would well up inside me and it was overwhelming and uncontrollable. I felt like a child about to be reunited with someone they loved dearly. I couldn't stop the wide smile that tugged at my lips as I thought about finally throwing myself into his arms and hugging him with everything I had.

The woman who guided me introduced herself as Bernadette.

I had heard of the Shadows before—whispers of their existence as well as the stories of their power—but I had never realized Leon was their master. That fact alone shook me, though deep down it shouldn't have been surprising. He was Leon after all. It felt only right, only natural, that he would have people this loyal and this strong under his command.

Bernadette herself was proof of that. The aura she gave off was heavy, sharp, and commanding, like a blade unsheathed. Even without moving, she radiated power that made me instinctively straighten my back, reminding me just how terrifyingly capable Leon's subordinates were.

After some time walking, we finally arrived at a place.

When my eyes lifted to see the sign, my breath caught in my throat.

Leonamon.

The name rang in my head like an echo from the past. It had been so long since I last heard it. The last time was before I left for the demon continent. Seeing it again now felt unreal, almost like staring into a memory that had manifested itself right before me.

I always knew Leon was the one behind this company, but even so, standing here now, I still couldn't fully wrap my mind around the reality of it. How? How had he managed to build something of this scale?

A wave of shame prickled my chest. He was younger than me... yet here he was, surpassing me, creating things I never could. I should have been proud, and I was, but that pride was tangled with a bittersweet sting.

As soon as I stepped inside, my eyes widened at the sight before me.

The entire place was bustling with activity, people working with sharp focus and discipline. But what struck me the most wasn't the scale or the liveliness—it was the fact that every single person working here was a woman.

At first, I blinked, confused.

But then, a small laugh escaped me. Leon... of course. Was he building himself a harem here? It was so like him. He'd always been a ladies' man, and it suited him perfectly. And honestly, considering he had taken me as well, could I even be shocked anymore? No, not at all.

"Master is waiting for you in that garden," Bernadette said softly, almost reverently.

With her words guiding me, I moved forward, my steps a little faster, my heart beating harder with every second.

I finally reached the place she spoke of and stepped inside.

The air shifted instantly.

It wasn't a room—it was a garden.

And not just any garden. My eyes widened in awe the moment they took it in. It was lush, vibrant and alive with colors and scents that made the whole space feel like a sanctuary. Flowers bloomed in perfect harmony, vines climbed gracefully, and rare plants I had only seen in books were spread out as if this garden was the center of the world itself.

It was breathtaking.

Not even the gardens of royalty could compare to this place. Their carefully manicured displays looked lifeless in my memory compared to the raw, almost magical beauty before me now.

At the far end of this magnificent garden, I saw him.

Leon.

The man with the same jet-black hair as mine.

He stood there quietly, holding something close to him, his presence as commanding and natural as ever.

The moment he sensed me, he turned, and when his eyes met mine, I felt my breath hitch.

But then my gaze dropped to what he was carrying.

My eyes widened instantly.

"Is that...?"

"Her name is Kana," Leon said. His voice carried a calmness, a warmth I hadn't heard in so long. "She's my child."

My heart nearly burst from my chest. A joy unlike anything I had felt before swelled inside me, and for a moment I thought it would consume me. I couldn't even describe it properly—the emotion was just too strong.

The little child in his arms... she was radiant. Beautiful in a way words couldn't capture. So small, so delicate, yet brimming with life.

She was everything I wasn't. Pure, innocent, untouched by the blood and danger that defined me.

Her eyes—those were Leon's. Unmistakably his. But her hair... blonde, soft like strands of sunlight. She looked like she was carved straight out of innocence itself.

"Do you want to hold her?" Leon asked.

My throat tightened.

"I-Is it... really okay for me to hold her?" I asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Of course," he said gently. "Kana's a very good girl. She's been sleeping quietly for a while now. But I'm sure if she sees you, she'll smile and reach out her hands for you."

I hesitated only for a moment before reaching out my arms, trembling slightly. Leon carefully transferred her into my embrace, and the instant her tiny body rested against my chest, I froze.

She was so light. So warm. So fragile.

I looked down at her, my eyes drinking in her face.

She was breathtaking. Absolutely breathtaking.

It felt as though life itself had gifted the world something precious, something untouchable, in the middle of all the chaos and danger that surrounded us.

Holding her was like touching joy itself for the very first time. That was how she felt in my arms.

Before I knew it, tears were streaming down my face. I didn't even understand why. Was it because this child was Leon's? Was it because she was a piece of him, created out of love? Whatever the reason, my heart couldn't hold it in.

Then, slowly, her eyelids fluttered open.

It was unsteady, almost hesitant, as if she was still trying to get used to the world around her.

Her tiny body shifted slightly, light as air against me.

"Uhee~..."

And then... she smiled.

The sweetest, most innocent smile I had ever seen in my life spread across her little face.

A smile that melted everything inside me in an instant.

"As I said," Leon's voice came, warm and certain, "she'll like you."